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Hagar's Help-- the Hope of All Mothers in Distress (Genesis 16:1-15)

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One word that is frequently used to describe the devastating effect that sin has had on the world is the word "brokenness." God created a world of perfect order and harmony, but as a result of sin's entrance into the world, that original order and harmony have now been shattered. Disorder and chaos are now the order of the day, and they are evident throughout the whole of creation. Nowhere is that more evident than in the sphere of human relationships. God created human beings to live in peace with Himself and with one another; but far too often, owing to human pride, unbelief and self-centeredness, people are torn apart by conflicts that put them at odds with one another, reaping a bitter harvest of sorrow, pain, and distress in their relationship.

The word "brokenness" aptly describes the consequences that befell the household of Abram, after he heeded the counsel of his wife and impregnated her servant girl Hagar, in an effort to "speed up" the fulfillment of a promise that God had made to him concerning a promised heir. Abram and Sarai had waited ten years for God to fulfill that promise, and in all that time, they had remained childless. When Sarai realized she was well beyond childbearing years, she began to fear that she might not have any part in God's plan concerning her husband; so in order to secure the fulfillment of God's promise in a way that included her, Sarai came up with a plan that seemed wise in her own eyes. Following the common custom of that day, Abram would conceive a child by Sarai's handmaid, a woman named Hagar, and that child would be considered legally, if not biologically, Sarai's son.

This plan, no doubt, seemed both pious and practical to Sarai, but it was totally disapproved by God, since it violated the sanctity of the marriage covenant. God ordained marriage to involve the exclusive union of one man with one woman for life. He never made any provision for a third party to be brought into the intimacy of that relationship. But instead of trusting in God's promise and awaiting its fulfillment in God's time and way, Sarai took matters into her own hands. Her impatience led her to act impulsively on the basis of human wisdom, and the result was that chaos was introduced into their home. Hagar conceived a child as planned; but her pregnancy made her proud, and she began to look down on Sarai. That created deep resentment in Sarai's heart, and seething bitterness toward her husband Abram, for he did nothing about the situation. .

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It may seem unfair that Sarai blamed Abram for the misery that her plan created, but in a sense, she was right to hold Abram accountable. After all, he was the head of the household. He was appointed by God to be the spiritual leader of their home. If he thought her plan was wrong, he should never have consented to it. For that reason, the greatest blame for this painful situation rested on Abram. Because of his failure in leadership, these two women ended up at each other's' throats. Neither had compassion on the other. Hagar strutted around before Sarai like a peacock, showing off her round belly; but Sarai, for her part, became vicious toward Hagar and mistreated her cruelly, until Hagar fled the scene, unable to take the abuse any longer.

When all is said and done, the greatest victim in this whole affair was Hagar, and it is on her that I want to focus our attention this morning. Hagar was the one figure who was drawn into this sordid scene against her will, because as a slave, she had no choice but to do what her mistress said. For that reason, she stands as a symbol for mothers all over this world who find themselves in distressing circumstances as a result of others' abusive treatment. That is not to say that Hagar was entirely without fault. She responded sinfully to circumstances that were thrust upon her. But we mustn't minimize the great wrong that was committed against her. She was misused, misled, and mistreated by her fellow men, and that led to her becoming a mother in distress. Yet God in his mercy came to her and ministered to her in her distress.

In God's dealings with Hagar, we see God's solution to the plight of every mother in distress-- and that solution is found in the compassionate concern of God Himself, who is not only the Creator of all, but the all-knowing, all-seeing God of grace, who delights to be the Helper of the Helpless. He is, as we read in Psalm 65, "a father of the fatherless, a defender of widows" (Psalm 65:5). He is mindful of all of who are desperate and needy, and near to all who call upon Him in their distress. In this passage, we see this truth illustrated, and we learn here that Hagar's Helper is the hope of all who find themselves overwhelmed by painful circumstances.

We will begin by considering the cause of Hagar's distress. Then we will look at Hagar's response to her distress, God's gracious intervention in her life; and the result of that gracious divine intervention.

I. The Cause of Hagar's Distress-- What were the causes of Hagar's distress in this passage? Without minimizing in any way her own sin, I want us to consider the great wrongs that were committed against her.

A. She was misused by others-- First, there is no question that she was misused by others. Abraham and Sarah did not treat Hagar in a way that respected her individuality

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and her full dignity as a human being. They saw her as nothing more than a breeding machine and treated her accordingly. That was not to love Hagar, but to use her as a pawn in their own schemes of personal ambition.

B. She was misled by others-- Second, Hagar was misled by others. Since she had been given to Abram to bear his child, she naturally began to think of herself as his wife, and began to look at and treat Sarai as if the gulf in social status between them had been erased. Of course, that was not how Sarai viewed the situation at all, nor did the society of that day. But you can see how difficult it must have been for Hagar to be carrying Abram's child, yet to act as if nothing had changed in terms of her status. She had been given to Abram as a secondary wife, but that misleading, because it was obvious that neither Sarah nor Abram had any intention for her to act in a wifely manner toward Abram, once she had provided the elderly couple with what they wanted. It must have been painful for Hagar to realize that all they wanted her for was to provide Abram with a baby. The morning sickness, the discomfort, the labor pains, were to be hers; but the joys and privileges of motherhood and wifeness were to belong to Sarah alone.

C. She was mistreated by others--Third, Hagar was mistreated by others. We see this mistreatment when the child is conceived, and Sarai, in retaliation for Hagar's arrogant attitude, begins to mistreat her terribly, while Abram, for his part, remains apathetic and uninvolved. His refusal to intervene and stop the abusive treatment was itself a form of abuse.

D. She was rejected by others--Finally, in addition to being misused, misled, and mistreated, Hagar was in a sense rejected, rejected by the very people had misused, misled and mistreated her. Because Sarai was so enraged at her, she became "persona non grata" in the household.

We can imagine the feeling of distress that gripped her heart at this moment--yes, even despair-- because she saw no hope for a happy future for herself or her child if she remained under the same roof with Abram and Sarai. She realized that she was not welcome there; the question was, where would she go? What could she do? She was defenseless, penniless, trapped in circumstances that were unbearable but difficult to cast off.

II. Hagar's Response to Her Distress--She felt completely alone in the world, completely without a single soul to turn to for help; and in such times, when present circumstances are a source of great pain, people often retreat in an idealized past as an escape from present harsh realities. Apparently, that is what Hagar did. She was so unhappy in Canaan, she began to dream about her past life in Egypt. It had been many

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years since she had left Egypt, but she knew that there were people in that land who would not despise her the way Sarai did-- her own kinsman, who would surely offer her some aid or support in her distress. She resolved to go back to Egypt, therefore; and on a certain day when she saw that the coast was clear, she took off in pursuit of her dream. She fled in the direction of Egypt, we know that because of verse 7, where we read that Hagar stopped at a spring on the way to Shur. Shur was a very dry, barren region in the northeast of Egypt, bordering Canaan. To get there, Hagar would have had to have traveled a number of days on foot, which would be quite an ordeal for a pregnant woman. But she was desperate to find someone sympathetic to her plight, and people will take extreme measures when they are in a state of desperation.

The journey must have been tiring and lonely one, and we can imagine what a pitiful sight it must have been to see that sad, pregnant woman walking down that barren road with a worried, confused look on her face. She had no clear idea where she was going. She was simply fleeing to get away from circumstances that she found unbearable.

Hagar reminds me of a lot of people who know only one way to deal with interpersonal conflict, and that is to flee. Some people become serial divorcees for this very reason-- they do not know how to deal with conflict. They think that the only possible response when trouble enters a relationship is to run from that relationship. So they do that over and over again. But the fact is, you can never simply run away from problems in relating to other people. When we do that, we only carry our problems with us-- the same character quirks, the same sinful responses to pressure, the same unresolved personal issues, and these will crop up in every future relationship, causing the same conflicts again and again, like a broken record. Instead of running away, God has appointed one and only one way to deal properly with conflict, and that is to run to Him, to confess our needs to Him, to rely on His wisdom and His grace to respond in a wise, gracious, and godly manner to every conflict we face.

Since Hagar did not yet know the Lord, however, she did not do that. She simply ran away; but thankfully, she was not able to outrun God. We read in verse 7, "Now the Angel of the Lord found her by a spring of water in the wilderness, by the spring on the way to Shur." How appropriate that the Angel of the Lord would overtake Hagar at that spot, because it underscores the fact that He was coming to her to open up to her the only spring of refreshment available to weary travelers on the road to life. She was exhausted from her journey in more ways than one; but through the words that this divine Messenger spoke to her, Hagar's weary soul was quickened and her drooping spirit revived with a sense of hope.

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III. God's Gracious Intervention in Hagar's Life-- Who was this angel of the Lord? And what did He do for Hagar to help her in her distress?

A. Who was this Angel of the Lord? The word angel in the Bible means messenger; and it can refer either to a human messenger, or to a heavenly being created by God who is sent forth as His messenger. The Angel of the Lord, however, is different from other angels; He is a mysterious figure who appears repeatedly in the Old Testament; and there is every reason to believe that He is none other than God Himself appearing to men in human form. There is a wonderful mystery here, for the word angel, as I said, means "messenger;" so what this suggests is that, whenever God wanted to appear to people in the Old Testament in human form, He did so as One sent by God. The Old Testament makes no attempt to explain this paradox; but it makes perfect sense in light of New Testament teaching on the Trinity-- for Jesus is sent out from the Father, yet at the same time, He is one with the Father in His essential being. He is God by nature, so He can speak as God; but at the same, He is sent out by God. So I believe this Angel of the Lord was none other than our Lord Jesus Christ Himself in pre-incarnate manifestation, sent out by the Father to minister to the saints of God throughout the period of the Old Testament.

What are some of the clues in this passage that this mysterious Angel was none other than God the Son, coming to Hagar in her need? First of all, notice how the Angel speaks to her as God in verse 10 by making her a divine promise in the first person singular: "Then the Angel of the Lord said to her, 'I will multiply your descendants exceedingly, so that they shall not be counted for multitude.'" Only God can multiply someone's descendants, and that is just what the Angel of the Lord promises to do for Hagar. Second, notice that after this Angel departs, Hagar recognizes the fact that she had seen a visible manifestation of God. Verse 13-- "Then she called the name of the Lord who spoke to her, You-Are-the-God-Who-Sees; for she said, 'Have I also here seen Him who sees me?'" A more exact translation of this verse is "Have I also seen after the One who sees me?" To "see after" someone is to see them from behind. This expression reminds me of what God said to Moses when Moses pleaded to see God's glory. God said to Moses, "You will see my back; but my face shall not be seen." To see the back of God is to see God with His glory veiled; that is how Hagar saw the Lord-- with His glory veiled in human form.

Other passages confirm this understanding that the Angel of the Lord is God Himself. For example, when the Angel of the Lord appears to Moses in the flame of the burning bush in Exodus 3, and Moses turns to look, we read "God called to him from the midst of the bush, and said 'Moses! Moses!'" So the Angel of the Lord is explicitly called God. Then we read that this Angel of the Lord spoke as God to Moses, saying, "I

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am the God of your father-- the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob." In response, we read, "Moses hid his face, for he was afraid to look upon God" (Exodus 3:5). So there can be no doubt, I believe, that this Angel who appeared to Hagar was none other than our Lord Jesus Christ in pre-incarnate manifestation. Why is that significant? It is significant because it highlights the fact that when we have lost our way in life and stand in desperate need of God's grace to deliver us from our lostness, that grace always comes to us through Christ. Christ is the Mediator of all grace to the elect of God. So it was Christ who came to Hagar in her hour of need to help her.

B. What did He do for Hagar? Let us review the steps by which this Angel of the Lord delivered Hagar from her confusion and distress, and set her feet on the path of peace.

1. First, He found her-- Notice the precious words in verse 7 "the Angel of the Lord found her." She did not find God; He found her. He went in pursuit of Hagar when she was in flight from everyone and everything that had been a part of her painful past. This is always the pattern we see in God's dealings with sinful men and women. He always takes the initiative in salvation. He comes to us when we are not seeking Him and He overwhelms with His grace in such a way as to effect a radical change in our heart and life. We turn around 180 degrees and begin walking in a different direction we never would have taken had God left us to our own devices. Saul of Tarsus was on his way to hunt down, imprison, and kill more Christian when God in his sovereign grace arrested him, stopped him in his tracks, brought to him his knees, and powerfully transformed him, so that he became a different man than he was before.

2. He reminded her of her identity and social status-- The second thing the Angel of the Lord did for Hagar was to remind her of her identity and social status. Notice how he addresses her, "Hagar, Sarah's maid, where have you come from and where are you going?" She had puffed herself up thinking that her pregnancy elevated her to a higher social status than that of a maidservant. But in fact, it did not. The social system in which she lived, as unjust as it may seem to us today-- and it was unjust-- made it very clear that a maidservant did not rise to the level of her mistress, just because she acted in the role of a surrogate mother for her mistress. The Code of Hammurabi, for example, said that if a concubine claimed equality with her mistress because she had born children for her mistress, the mistress could demote her to her former status.

By reminding her that she was still "Sarah's maid," God was calling Hagar to submit to the divine providence that had placed her where she was. She may have flattered herself into thinking she was on a level now with Sarai, but in fact, she was

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not; and the only way she could know peace in her life was to stop fleeing reality; she had to accept the station in which God placed her, until and unless God Himself by His providence should change it.

You know, God gives the same counsel to servants in the New Testament. In 1 Corinthians 7, he instructs Roman slaves who may have been filled with frustration over their servile status to realize that true freedom is a spiritual grace, and that it does not depend ultimately on one's social status: "Let each one remain in the same calling in which he was called. Were you called while a slave? Do not be concerned about it; but if you can be made free, rather use it. For he who is called in the Lord while a slave is the Lord's freedman. Likewise, he who is called while free is Christ's slave. You were bought at a price; do not become slaves of men. Brethren, let each one remain with God in that state in which he was called." What Paul is saying is that our spiritual status is infinitely more important than our social status, and that should govern the way we think about our lives in this world. For if we are in Christ, we have been set free spiritually, and the enjoyment of our freedom depends on our ability to be content in whatever circumstances the Lord has placed us. Now, of course, Paul recognized that it was a good thing to enjoy the social status of a free man-- so he tells slaves, "If you can lawfully get rid of your bonds, by all means do so." But at the same time, he says to them, "Do not fret over your social status. Do not live as though the top priority in your life were to cast off your bonds. If that is your top priority, you have not yet learned what it means to be a free man in Christ" (1 Cor. 7:20-24). How important it is for us all to learn this lesson that true freedom is something that men can neither confer on us, nor take away. It is an inward, spiritual grace by which we are enabled to serve the Lord and be joyful in the Lord in whatever circumstances He has called us.

3. He called her to reflect on her present course of action-- To drive home that lesson, the Angel of the Lord called Hagar to reflect on her present course of action by asking her, "Where have you come from, and where are you going?" Now, of course, the Angel knew perfectly well the answer to those questions, but He wanted Hagar to reflect on what she was doing. He was saying to her, in essence, "Is this really the way to freedom, Hagar? Is this really the way that you will know peace inside-- by rejecting the Lord's providence which has brought you out of pagan Egypt into the home of two people who, despite their imperfections, nevertheless know the Lord, and love Him? Wake up and realize, Hagar, how the Lord has blessed you by where he has put you He has brought you out of pagan darkness and placed you in the home of a worshipper of the true and living God, that you might learn from him and his wife the ways of the Lord. Forgive the wrong they have done you; and be willing to apologize

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for the wrong you have done to them. Stop fleeing and be reconciled to those who have caused you pain."

4. He commanded her to return by the way she came and submit to authority-- This is the fourth thing, therefore, the Angel of the Lord commanded Hagar to do. He commanded her to return by the way she came and submit herself once again to her mistress' authority. "Return to your mistress, and submit yourself under the hand." God showed Hagar that this was only way to find peace-- by embracing the path of duty. If she would know God's blessing on her life, she had to learn to submit to the work of God in her life. She must not chafe under His yoke in a spirit of lawless rebellion; but rather, to turn to Him in her distress and say, "Lord, show me what you would have me learn in these circumstances; grant me the grace of surrender to your sovereign will." There is no more important lesson we can learn in life than that, and nothing more essential for our own peace and joy.

5. He encouraged her with assurances of future blessing and ever-present watch care-- The fifth thing the Angel of the Lord did for Hagar was to encourage her with assurances of future blessing and to assure her of His ever present watch care and concern for her.

First, He told her that her descendants would be greatly multiplied, so much so they would be innumerable. This news must have amazed Hagar, for it meant that God intended to bless her far beyond what she could ever have imagined. Even though she may have been a nobody in the world's eyes, she was obviously significant in God's eyes, for He intended to bless her by making her the matriarch of a multitude.

Second, God told her that she would have a son, and that son would be to her a sign that God was not ignorant of her needs or indifferent to her plight, but was in fact quite close to her and attentive to her cries. How would her son remind of that truth? By virtue of his name, Ishmael, which means, "God hears." How wonderfully assuring it must have been for Hagar to hear those words from the Lord. Her very son would be a sign to her of God's nearness. The name "God hears" is not only comforting, however, but also a sobering reminder that God hears every idle word that we speak and will call us to account for those things we say that are offensive to Him. That, too, Hagar must remember, whenever she might be tempted to respond to Sarai in a surly manner. She must recall that, "God hears" and will judge her for impudent speech.

The third thing that God told her is that the son she was carrying in her womb would grow up to be a nonconformist whose headstrong ways would make it difficult

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for him to get along with others. That seems to be the term "wild man" in verse 12. This phrase could more literally be translated as "wild donkey." Joyce Baldwin points out that in the Bible, a wild donkey does not symbolize stupidity, but rather "fierce independence, stubborn pride, and untamable strength." A wild donkey loves his freedom; and so will Hagar's son. Unlike his mother, he will be a slave to no man. But his resistance to wearing any yoke will make it difficult for him to be yoked together with others in a civil society. He will find it difficult to live with or get along with his neighbors; in fact, he will live in opposition to them. Now, we know that modern-day Arabs claim to be descended from Ishmael; if that is so, is this not a remarkable description of the way that the Arabs have gotten along with their neighbors-- particularly their Jewish neighbors-- right up to the present day? Here we see further proof of the amazing accuracy of Bible prophecy.

IV. The Result of God's Gracious Intervention-- What was Hagar's response to this gracious intervention by God?

First, she was overwhelmed with a sense of awe that God would take cognizance of her in this way. She was deeply comforted by the fact that God noticed her and cared for her in her plight; that is obvious from the name she gave to the well where she had this encounter with God. She called it "Beer Lahai Roi" which means, "Well of the One who lives and sees me." Never again would Hagar see herself as forgotten by God; instead, she would be keenly aware of His abiding presence and the fact that His all-seeing eye was always upon her, wherever she was.

Second, Hagar was humbled by her encounter with God and submitted to His authority. That is obvious from the way that she immediately returned to household from which she had fled, in order to submit herself to Sarai's authority.

Third, it appears that she also inspired in Abram and Sarai by her example a similar attitude of submission to God's will. That is evident from the fact that they received her back and that she continued to remain with them until after Ishmael was weaned. Not all the problems in that household were solved, by any means. As we will see in chapter 21, eventually Hagar and Ishmael did separate from Abraham and Sarai. But for the moment, there was a lull in the battle, and there was at least outward submission by all involved to God's clearly revealed will that Hagar remain with Abram and Sarai. Warren Wiersbe points out that though the record does not tell us how Sarai responded, "it would appear that she accepted both Hagar and her report and took her back as her servant. Sarah did not mistreat her again; for after all, God was watching!"

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CONCLUSION-- God's dealings with Hagar should be of great comfort to single mothers who like Hagar, who find themselves in circumstances in which they feel terribly alone, defenseless, and forgotten. But this passage should be of comfort to all of us, really, because there are times in the life of every Christian when we may find ourselves overwhelmed by our circumstances. There are times when we may find ourselves, like Hagar, walking down a barren road, feeling weary, lost, and without direction-- not knowing where we are going, or how we got to where we are. Moreover, at such times, we may be a great mystery to ourselves, unable to see or understand what is going on inside us. The thoughts and intents of our hearts may hidden from us, and the more we try to peer into our hearts, the more it seems as if we were looking into a fathomless pit of darkness. At such times, what a comfort it is to know that God sees us. He sees and knows everything about us-- perfectly. When we are disoriented, He knows just where we are, and therefore, He is able to lead us out of the darkness into the light.

To be led out of her darkness, however, Hagar had to submit to God; and she did. She submitted by going back to the household from which she had fled. She was able to do that, precisely because she knew that God was with her, and she was never out of His sight. He was the God who saw her. For God to see us means much more than that He sees our outward form. It means that He sees everything about us. He sees our true spiritual condition, our deepest needs, and He knows just how to minister to those needs. Nothing about us escapes His sight. He has a completely exhaustive knowledge of every one of us.

Have you trusted in in this God? Have you call upon Him to bring you out of darkness through His Son, Jesus Christ? Have you embraced His gracious forgiveness in Christ, and have you submitted to the gentle yoke of His divine authority? It is only by trusting submission to the will of God that we can find a way out of the desert into which our sins have taken us, so that we may begin our journey home along the path of duty, which is the path of peace. Amen.